

WHEN THE CORPSES RISE:  
SOME TIBETAN RO LANGS STORIES

This paper is intended as a modest contribution to the study of the Tibetan *ro langs* beliefs. It is based on a few stories told by two exile Tibetans living in Nepal.

These stories are about meetings with wandering corpses, *ro langs* (lit. « risen corpse »), and were told with much delight. I think they are good examples of the Tibetan fondness for the drastic and the macabre.

Comparatively little has been published on *ro langs* and still much work has to be done before a more penetrating analysis can be carried out of these complex beliefs. Thus there are difficulties in delimitating these beliefs, which appear to be made up of parts of different origins. In a paper of this limited length this complexity can only be hinted at.

In an article published in 1964 Turrell Wylie distinguished between two types of *ro langs*: the « tantric » and the « demonic »<sup>1</sup>. A « tantric » *ro langs* is a corpse activated through a ritual by someone for personal reasons. A « demonic » *ro langs*, on the other hand, is a corpse activated by demons in order to bring misery and destruction to men.

A rather famous example of a *ro langs* of the « tantric » type is given in the relations of the foundation of the Odantapurī monastery preserved in more or less unanimous versions in several Tibetan chronicles<sup>2</sup>.

There we are told, if we follow Tāranātha's version, of a yogī who wished to achieve a certain siddhi, the power to activate corpses (*ro langs kyi dngos grub*). In order to carry out the necessary ritual he needed an assistant possessing certain qualities. The only one he could find, however, was a Buddhist upāsaka, who first hesitated, but finally agreed to participate after having been promised a substantial reward.

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1. Wylie, 1964, p. 69 ff.

2. *Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, p. 34 f.; Tāranātha, p. 192 ff. (Translations: Chattopadhyaya, 1970, p. 262 ff.; Schiefner, 1869, pp. 206 ff.; Wylie, 1964, p. 69 ff.); *dPa'o gtsug lag*, fol. 92b f.; *sBa bzjed*, p. 33 f.; *Sum pa mkhan po*, p. 111.

The yogī now had to, through certain manipulations, make a corpse stick out its tongue, which in that moment the upāsaka had to get hold of. Three opportunities would be offered. The best would be if he could catch the tongue the first time. But should he not succeed at all, terrible things would happen. The corpse would then rise, that is become a *ro langs*, and kill and devour the yogī and his assistant. Thereafter that fate would come upon all people in the country. Now it happened that the upāsaka failed the first two times. He, therefore, put his mouth over that of the corpse, in order not to fail the last time. In this way he managed to catch the tongue with his teeth.

When the tongue then was torn off, it turned into a sword and the body of the corpse changed into gold. With the help of the sword the yogī flew to the land of the gods (*lha yul*), while the upāsaka, as his reward, received the corpse. Through cutting off pieces of flesh from the golden corpse and selling them, the upāsaka was then able to raise funds for the building of the Odontapuri monastery.

Unfortunately little more than this seems to be known about this type of *ro langs* and this siddhi. The scarcity of the available material makes it hard to form an opinion of the nature of the ritual and of the beliefs forming its base. The other type of *ro langs*, the «demonic», is quite different from the «tantric», and it seems to belong to another belief-complex.

Four examples of such «demonic» *ro langs* stories will be given here<sup>3</sup>. The first two stories were told by a man about forty years old at that time. He earned his living as a porter and by various odd jobs. The last two stories were told by a man, a carpet-weaver, then about twenty-six years old. Both men were living in a Tibetan refugee-camp outside the town of Pokhara in Nepal. Both men were also *dpa' bos*, spirits-mediums<sup>4</sup>.

### Story No. 1.

My grandfather, who was a *dpa' bo*, had gone away to carry out a séance in another village. On his way home, he stayed at a place in order to rest late in the evening. He put his equipment on a stone and lay down to sleep. In his sleep he heard the *A bsve* bird<sup>5</sup> calling three times. It sounded as «*kyung khyung*», «*pug pug*», and «*cig cig cig*». The bird called like that, loudly. My father woke up, his mind filled with apprehensions. He wondered if it was an enemy or a bear or a *ro langs* that was coming. He rose, saddled his horse and took his things. He was just about to ride away when he saw a *ro langs* appear from a

3. The stories were told, and written down, in Tibetan. The rather free translations appearing here are mine.

4. Concerning spirit-mediums of the *dpa' bo*-type, see Berglie, 1976.

5. A *bsve rgyal ba*, a god of the *btsan* class is, according to the *dpa' bos*, accompanied by this bird, an owl.

heap of stones. It came straight at him. Then, suddenly, three wolves came running. They tore the walking corpse to pieces and devoured it. This was told by my grandfather.

### Story No. 2.

This happened when I was a young boy and my grandfather still was alive. He used to make *maṇi*-stones<sup>6</sup>, as did many of our neighbours. Once I went with him and some other people to make such stones. A man in the neighbourhood had just died. This was in the winter and everything was frozen. The dead man was lying near where we cut the stones. He was a very thin man. When they took stones and began to cut, I saw the corpse move. I wondered how it could move and stared at it. Then someone told me to take a stone too, in order to collect merits for myself and others. My grandfather said so too. But I said: « The corpse is moving ». But the others said that there must be something wrong with my eyes. The corpse cannot move. But I saw that it was trying to rise. I told them this again and begged them to cut the corpse with a knife. I thought the flesh should be bloody, not frozen. Just when I said that, the corpse fell on its left side. Then it pressed the hands and forehead against the ground and tried to rise. I again begged them to look. My grandfather then did that and saw the corpse trying to rise. He immediately ran for his '*phreng ba*', rosary, which he had put on a rock, and his '*phur bu*', ritual dagger, which he always brought with him. Now the corpse had knees, hands and forehead on the ground, but had raised its body. My grandfather struck the corpse three times with his '*phur bu*' and cried *phaṭ*. He also struck it with his '*phreng ba*'. From the corpse then came the sound « *bog bog bog* », and blood streamed from its mouth and nose. Then it fell flat on the ground. Such a *ro langs* is called blood-*ro langs* (*khrag ro langs*). My grandfather defeated it.

### Story No. 3

This happened when I was a boy, in Tibet. I was away from home guarding the sheep of a rich man. In the afternoon a man had died. He was lying where the sheep used to graze. I had not sense enough to be afraid. I put my hand over my mouth and nose and went up to the dead man to take a look.

In the evening I crossed the river and started for home. Then I saw the corpse running on the other side of the river. It was completely naked, but carried its belt in one hand and its boots in the other. Then I saw a wolf coming after it, felling it to the ground. When I came back to that place the next morning, there was much blood on the

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6. Stones on which « *om maṇi padme hūm* » has been cut.

ground. That was all that was left of this *ro langs*. This happened when I was a boy of about eight or nine.

#### Story No. 4

Once there was a *lha pa* (spirit-medium). He sometimes went to other places to perform. One evening he did not manage to get home to his own house. When it was too dark to ride on, he stayed to sleep out in the open. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, his horse became very unruly. It started to jump. Then it ran away. In the moonlight he then saw a dark figure approaching with a stiff-legged, waddling gait. He wondered what it could be. He watched the creature intently and finally understood that it was a *ro langs*. He put on his *rigs lnga*<sup>7</sup>, took his *mi rkang*<sup>8</sup> and walked towards the *ro langs*. They stopped, face to face. Then the corpse tried to put its hand on the *lha pa*'s head, but did not succeed. Now the *lha pa* quickly took off his head-dress and hit the *ro langs* with it. All people in the neighbourhood woke up from the scream, the *ro langs* in that moment let out.

I myself did not see this. Other people have told it.

The genre-analysis of these stories, in a folkloristic sense, is made difficult through the scarcity of the material. Are they migratory legends or memorates<sup>9</sup>? From their richness in details and their evident individual characters, and from the fact that it is the story-teller himself, or a person very close to him, who had had the experience, the conclusion that they are to be considered as memorates, is near at hand. It must be remembered, however, that a good story-teller, ought to tell his stories, especially if they are of this kind, as if they were personal experiences. Thus it is quite possible to give traditional legends or fairytales the form of a memorate in order to impress the audience more strongly. More *ro langs* stories thus have to be collected and published before we can pass a judgement in these matters.

Both informants distinguished between three kinds of *ro langs*: *khrag langs*, *rus langs* and *rme langs*, blood-, bone- and mole- *ro langs*. This partition is made according to how the walking corpse has to be subdued.

A *khrag langs* has to be wounded, while a *rus langs* has to get a bone in its body broken. Harder to defeat is a *rme langs*: it has to be cut exactly on its mole.

7. Concerning this head-gear of the *dpa' bos*, see Berglie, 1976, p. 95.

8. *Mi rkang* (*gling bu*) is a trumpet made of a human thighbone. According to the *dpa' bos*, however, a spirit-medium may not use ritual items made of human bones. The trumpets they use are of horn or metal, but still called *mi rkang*.

9. For a discussion of the problems of genre-analysis, see, for instance, Pentikäinen, 1968.

Wylie's informants distinguished two further types of *ro langs*, namely *lpags langs* and *sha langs*, skin- and flesh-*ro langs*<sup>10</sup>. Logically, however, these might perhaps be seen as varieties of the *khrag langs*.

Whether there are further distinctions between the different kinds of *ro langs*, my informants could not tell. But in the case of a *rus langs*, one of them thought that the possessing demon was residing in the skeleton of the corpse.

A similar vagueness was also found in the conception of the corpse-activating demons. They were simply called '*dre*, a term used for evil spirits of various kinds, possessing few individual characteristics, but always believed to be ready to cause trouble to men. One of the informants meant that these '*dre* preferred entering the corpses of men who, in the hour of death, had not been able to divert their thoughts from their family and friends. By this he evidently tried to place the *ro langs* on a Buddhist scale of moral values<sup>11</sup>.

A *ro langs*, I was further told, is not able to walk as a living man. Instead it walks with a rocking gait, since it cannot bend its legs properly. And since it cannot bend its back either, it is preferable to make the doorways to houses rather low, so it cannot enter. Because of these locomotional difficulties, a *ro langs* cannot cross rivers or pass mountains.

The most dangerous thing, however, about a *ro langs* is that it can make other people insane or mad (*smyo*) by laying its palm on the victim's head. Thus, if a *ro langs* is not subdued, it can make the people of a whole valley, or a whole region « mad ». In two of the stories above, the wandering corpse was vanquished by animals, in two by men. In principle anyone is considered able to subdue a *ro langs*, if he knows the right way. But it is thought to be easier for anyone who possesses powerful ritual instruments, for instance a Lama or a spirit-medium.

These walking corpses are, as we have seen, thought to be activated by demons, who have entered the corpse and thus taken possession of it. Demons are not, however, just believed to take possession of corpses, but also of living men and animals. This, of course, serves as an explanation of illnesses of certain kinds, and may cause rites of exorcism to be performed. This is a negative, non-functional, undesired possession. But there is also a positive, functional, desired possession. This is the case when gods enter men, spirit-mediums, in a ritual context, to cure illness, to tell the future etc. In order to make room for the god, the *dpa' bos* told me, they have to send away their own consciousness (*rnam shes*). The brief moment his body then is « empty », that is without consciousness, and not yet taken possession of by the god, is considered extremely dangerous. The reason for this is that an « empty » body is always threatened by demonic possession. This is a threat not only to the body of a living man, but also to that of a dead. In order

10. Wylie, 1964, p. 73.

11. Compare Edgerton, 1927, p. 231 ff.

to make it impossible for demons to enter, the spirit-medium, during the initial phase of the séance, places guardian deities at all the entrances to his body. Because if a demon enters, it will pretend to be a god, and mislead the help-seeking people.

Not only are spirit-mediums believed to be able to send away their consciousness, and not only are gods and demons believed to enter bodies, but there are also techniques, by which a man can send his own consciousness away, or into another body, human or animal. I am referring to 'pho ba and 'pho ba grong 'jug, practices found in Tibetan, and late Indian Buddhism, but probably of great age. One may note, for instance, that Yogasūtra III: 38 says that the entrance of mind, citta, into another body, paraśarīrāveśa, is one of the powers a yogī can attain<sup>12</sup>.

'Pho ba and 'pho ba grong 'jug are mainly known to us from the bKa' rgyud pa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism<sup>13</sup>. The first is a technique by which the consciousness (vijñāna, rnam shes), at the moment of death, is sent away from the body through the passage at the top of the head, in order that it may reach a happier state of existence. This rite is to be practised in life-time, if one is going to master it before death. Interestingly enough, the practice was evidently spread among common Tibetans, especially among shepherds<sup>14</sup>. Stories about such people who had gained mastery in 'pho ba were circulated in Tibet.

The related practice of 'pho ba grong 'jug concerns the transference of one's own consciousness into the body of a dead animal or man. This technique was brought to Tibet by Marpa. He transmitted it to his son, Dar ma sdo sde, whose accidental death cut off the chain of transmittance of this strange rite in Tibet. But we possess in the biography of Marpa, the interesting story of how Dar ma sdo sde transferred his consciousness into a bird, which then flew to India. There another transference took place, from the bird into a dead Brahman boy, who thus became alive again. His first words, it may be noted, were: «Nga ro langs min», I am not a ro langs<sup>15</sup>!

These examples show that beliefs in what might be called possessional states are to be found at many levels and in many contexts in Tibetan religion. They evidently have different historical and cultural backgrounds, but are expressed and explained in similar terms.

The ro langs stories may be seen as entertaining examples of such beliefs. This is not to say that they are the products of, but simply that they fit in well with such beliefs ideologically. Basically, there is nothing Buddhist about the ro langs stories and beliefs. They may, perhaps,

12. Yogasūtra III, 38, bandhakāraṇaśaithilyāt pracārasaṁvedanāc ca cittasya paraśarīrāveśaḥ.

13. On 'pho ba and 'pho ba grong 'jug, see Chang, 1963, p. 111 ff.; Dargyay, 1978, pp. 63-72; Evans-Wentz, 1958, 246-76; Guenther, 1963, pp. 197-202; Macdonald, 1967, 24 f.; Wayman, 1973, p. 145 ff.; Yü, 1949.

14. Dargyay, 1978, p. 56 f.

15. Bacot, 1937, p. 106.

best be seen as Tibetan variations on the theme of revenants and ghosts, found all over the world<sup>16</sup>.

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16. The *ro langs* beliefs discussed in this paper have their place in Tibetan folk religion and folklore. The *ro langs* to be found in the Tibetan versions of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśatikā* (see Macdonald, 1967 and 1972), seems to belong to the fictional literature. It is not treated here, since we do not know of any religious beliefs or practices forming its base. Another theme, that of «body-exchange», also to be found in (Indian and Tibetan) fictional literature (see Bloomfield, 1917) has certain affinities with the topics discussed in this paper. But in this case, too, we are moving in the world of literature, not in the world of religious beliefs.

Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho

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